Methods of Effectively Leveraging Departmental Assessment Programs

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Our collective experience as academics has led us to fear that departmental assessment plans will just sit on some anonymous shelf; our hard work will disappear into the black hole of administrative demands; and the lack of university response will become one more chip on our faculty's shoulders as yet another example of wasted effort. The question thus facing the departmental chair is: How do we ensure that our work benefits our programs? In other words, how do we make mandated assessment plans meaningful?

Establishing Departmental "Buy-In"

It is clear from the assessment literature that there is no single way to create a good assessment plan. The process and structure should reflect the needs and idiosyncrasies of both institutional and departmental communities. Such factors as the percentage of tenured versus non-tenured faculty members in the department, the balance between recent hires accustomed to assessment and more cynical faculty members who have been through multiple university strategic planning cycles, and whether the university has a culture of assessment inform the strategies the chair must utilize in implementing assessment plans. For example, if a university or college has a culture of non-assessment—forms are filled out, reports are filed, but decisions still appear to be arbitrary and not based on the aforementioned reports—a department chair should not pressure her department to comply with assessment with the justification that the department will receive external benefits. This approach, on the other hand, would be very effective in a university with a culture of assessment, where well-implemented assessment plans result in additional faculty lines and departmental resources.

One way of garnering departmental investment in these programs is to demonstrate to faculty how they can benefit from assessment. However, every department will differ as to their triggering issues (AAHE 1992). For example, members of a department may be curious to discover why their students are not going to law school as frequently as in the past. To answer this question they consider LSAT score and matriculation patterns, review the performance of their majors compared to other majors in the university, analyze contributing alterations in the department over the years, and determine how their program differs from others that appear to be more successful. These findings allow them to make adjustments designed to improve the success rates of their students' law school applications. In other political science departments, the salient issue may be to improve the caliber of graduate students entering the program or enhance students' ability to serve as competent research assistants. Regardless of the issue, the key is to find an assessment outcome in which faculty members are invested.

A second approach is to give individuals responsibility for reviewing and analyzing one element of the raw data collected for program review (e.g., one writes a brief report scrutinizing the results of a majors survey, another examines publication patterns of the department relative to student credit hours generated). In undergraduate programs, it is useful to integrate some of the survey development and interpretation into methods (and other) courses. This lightens the load on the faculty, provides practical experience for the students, and engages students in the process of assessment. This process may, in some institutions, be of similar value with graduate students.

The key to establishing buy-in is leadership from the departmental chair. The chair must see the potential of assessment in improving quality teaching, research outcomes, and student engagement, as well as departmental quality—regardless of the administrative response. If the chair does not see the transformative potential of assessment, it will be very difficult to convince the department.

Importance of Connections with Administration

Similarly, it is important to encourage university officials to commit to the change and potential of the department (AAHE 1992; Banta et al. 1996; Palomba and Banta 1999). By building bridges to different administrative offices and illustrating departmental support for university objectives (increasing enrollment, meeting financial need, assessing programs), administrators will be more willing to work with the department to solve these problems. The initiative for change then rests on the department to find a solution that meets departmental needs, as opposed to having solutions pressed upon faculty by administrators. One example we all face is the pressure for accreditation self-study in the years immediately prior to the evaluation. When the administration-driven assessment push begins on campus, the wise department will have already done this in a fashion that *helped the political science program.* This department is less likely to be subjected to a "cookie-cutter," "one-size-fits-all" approach to assessment.

After the assessment process, the department will have the evidence necessary to assist in the increasingly data-driven decision making of administrators. For example, departments can demonstrate the comparative inexpensiveness of political science by highlighting higher student satisfaction ratings on national surveys by political science majors, or of the department's intellectual rigor through the positive impact of political science courses on the university's critical thinking objectives. In times of budget shortfalls and belt-tightening, this documented evidence may assist the department more than all the self-professed claims of "rigor" and "excellence" (which hopefully they can now demonstrate).

Closing the Feedback Loop: Change Based on Assessment

Assessment helps very little if the information does not influence decision-making processes or determinations. Carefully developed reports that reside in a binder have no real impact, are of limited value, and are wasteful. However, even if no one outside of the department examines the data, the department can benefit if it learns from the assessment process and discusses its findings. The department (and the chair) must be committed to using the assessment findings to impact the graduate or undergraduate curriculum, departmental policies, or other aspects of departmental life. Assessment can improve the way we work. Its findings should inform future departmental decisions and encourage faculty to bring the same inquiring mind to their teaching and university life as they do to their research. If, annually, the department discusses what has been discovered through assessment and plans the alterations to be made in response, than the assessment process will have been leveraged for the good of the department, not for the external audiences that may have compelled it.

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Assessment is increasingly present on many campuses, and as state legislatures, parents, employers, and accreditation agencies continue to ask for documentation of what students learn at college, it is not likely to go away in the near future. How, then, do we know what our students learn? How can we demonstrate that they do learn, and what they learn?

Assessment of undergraduate programs is perhaps most difficult when a department's identity is centered on graduate education and research. How can department chairs charged with undergraduate program assessment in a university culture that emphasizes research and graduate education over teaching undergraduates convince faculty that assessment is a useful exercise rather than just an additional chore that eats into departmental resources? I suggest there are at least four ways in which assessment can have positive aspects for a department even when the departmental focus is not on undergraduate teaching:

1. If one of the goals of the undergraduate program is to enhance its reputation by sending its best students to prestigious graduate programs, assessment could promote this goal by producing systematic placement data. These data could not just be used to recruit and attract new outstanding undergraduates, but also as a first step to assess how more graduating majors could be sent to first-rate graduate programs.

2. Oftentimes, faculty members under research pressure rely on graduate students to assist with research tasks. Departmental assessment could help identify ways to enhance undergraduates' research skills, thus providing them with an overall better education in their major, and enabling them to provide additional assistance to either the professors themselves or work in teams with graduate students. This research experience would not just benefit the professors, but might also increase the students' competitive edge for gaining acceptance into top graduate programs.

3. If program assessment relies partially on classroom assessment, professors would benefit from an incentive to analyze what students learned in their undergraduate classes. Giving some credit to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) according to the teacher-scholar model, where research on student learning in the classroom is assessed systematically and published in peer-reviewed journals, might provide this incentive and also assist new faculty members in pursuing tenure and promotion.

4. Annual assessment data and documentation on how departments have pursued improvement of the program are useful when the department is going through the periodic program review cycle in place in many colleges and universities. These data can often be used and included in larger periodic program reviews.

The bottom line is that assessment of an undergraduate program can be beneficial not just to undergraduate education itself, but can also support other departmental goals if it is viewed as an integral part of the overall departmental mission.

In sum, while assessment of undergraduate programs can be conducted in many different ways without incurring prohibitive costs or taking up too much of faculty members' time, it is important that the goals of assessment meet the overall departmental mission or objectives. Thus, defining the assessment goals of the undergraduate program in line with a department's emphasis on graduate education and research could enhance the department's identity rather than distract from its focus. On the other hand, if undergraduate education is a primary goal of the department, that would, of course, also be reflected in the underlying objectives of assessment. My point here is simply that assessment of an undergraduate program can benefit departments even if undergraduate education is not a primary focus.

Furthermore, as undergraduate program assessment is used by higher administration to assess departments rather than students, it is useful to keep a few things in mind when defining objectives for assessment:

- It is generally useful to target the areas that are particularly important to your program, where you can show what your program does, and maybe identify how this can be done even better.
- It might also be useful to emphasize the significance of the discipline within college education. When resources are scarce, administration sometimes looks to identify programs of low priority. Thus, it is important to demonstrate the contribution of your program to the university and society at large. In other words, what does your program do, or do better, than other programs or disciplines in your college or university?

Another important consideration relates to the resources needed to conduct meaningful assessment. Some questions to ask when planning assessment include, for example:

- What will be the cost? Will there be resources available from sources outside the department or will the department need to pay all expenses?
- Who will oversee and conduct the assessment process? Will there be compensation or rewards for faculty who spend time on departmental or program assessment?

If additional resources for assessment are limited, some low-cost options include:

- Using existing data: Many colleges and universities have assessment offices that can make useful data available to programs, such as student demographics, enrollment patterns, graduation rates, or future career plans. Often, these offices also administer exit surveys to graduating seniors. It might be possible for departments to add program-specific questions at no extra cost.
- Using student work that is already available, such as projects from capstone courses, research projects, term papers, etc., to assess what students have learned.
- Especially in large programs, using samples of students might be easier than attempting to collect data from all students. This can also be a good alternative if nationally normed reference tests, such as the ETS Field Test, are used. Using samples allows for keeping the costs for these tests down.

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